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STAT

Seventh Crisis

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He didn't make it, and now he must know he never will. But he lost by a razor-edge margin, which may lead him—as it leads some others—to believe that history somehow cheated him out of what was rightfully his.

Go fight history. Instead Richard Nixon keeps mulling over his scarred years, and what they keep coming back to is a series of encounters with history which he always won—except the last (the Presidential campaign) which happened to be the decisive one.

He calls them in his book his "Six Crises" (Doubleday), the gentle hint being that a man whose life has been a succession of crises should know how to handle the big national and international puzzlers, if only history (and an incalculable electorate) would entrust them to him.

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He wrote the book, I think, in order to be an author: Didn't Whittaker Chambers write "Witness" and John F. Kennedy "Profiles in Courage"? He wants to explain himself, and keep explaining himself, not just to tell us how it was but to tell himself how it was. But what has so far emerged is a prime case of foot-in-mouth disease.

First there was the strange business of accusing Kennedy of campaign dishonesty over the CIA briefing on the Cuba invasion, where Nixon got slapped down by no less an authority than Allen Dulles; and where he ended by convicting himself of duplicity to the public. Then, in the midst of this uproar, there was the gaffe of calling the President a "carpetbagger." (In a California conscious only of novels about Howard Hughes and the movie colony, this must have thrown everyone into confusion.)

Now he has managed to drag Alger Hiss' old Woodstock typewriter, which was the focus of a thousand battles about his guilt or innocence, back into the news. Only a genius at blundering could have put into his book exactly what the die-hard Hiss partisans have been saying for years—that the FBI was in possession of the Hiss typewriter a good while before it confessed discovering it and turned it over to the defense.

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After the 1960 campaign, one of Nixon's top lieutenants told me ruefully that the liberals had been exactly wrong on both counts of their indictment of Nixon. They had called him a reactionary—which he wasn't. And they had called him a cunning politician—which he also wasn't, but a sure and massive politicial blunderer. I think he was right. Will it prove the final irony of the whole sequence of ironies in Nixon's career that a book intended to show his heroic role in the Hiss case should also be the one to reopen the case in the minds of even the convinced, and give Hiss the last taunting line in the tortured dialogue between the two men?

"Neither victim nor executioner be," Camus said. Nixon has triumphantly succeeded in being both. He kept at Hiss like a nemesis character out of Jean Valjean, and probably rightly—despite the new Woodstock gambit he has given Hiss's defenders. But just when you think he has his case clinched he snatches doubt from the jaws of certainty. He is his own choicest victim, his own executioner. Those who once regarded him as evil will have to revise their estimate. He is only, in a minor but persistent way, history's fool.

Possibly I am being unfair to him, but the trouble with Nixon is that he brings out the unadmirable in all his critics, as well as only the most grudging defense from his friends. The myth that his critics are against him because of his Hiss role—a myth just repeated by Raymond Moley as well as by Nixon—has come to bore me, and I hope it will be retired with a pension for old age and ennui. The fact is that the only effective thing Nixon ever did was in the Hiss case: Everything after that—the fund, the Caracas trip, the kitchen debate, the ghastly TV shambles—was only pathetic.

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There are some who talk about the closeness of his Presidential defeat as if it meant he would have been as good as Kennedy in the White House. I cannot share so genial a view. The whole episode has almost persuaded me that early American patriots were right in their conviction of a special providential eye on America.

I shudder also at another hazard we missed. There is a moralizing unction in passages of his book, summing up in do-it-yourself fashion exactly how the reader too can meet his crises, that makes me reflect on the crisis of tastelessness the nation has so far avoided.

That he is a scarred man you cannot doubt. The fund fight left a deep scar, and for all the courage and presence of mind he showed in the Caracas affair, that also left a humiliating scar, and the kitchen debate left one because it didn't really lead anyone to class him in the Khrushchev league, and the TV fiasco left one, and the election left one—to have waited so long and then to have missed!

But I wonder whether the man who left the deepest scar was not a man named Eisenhower, whom he reverently holds up as a peerless leader.